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Research Paper

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Unity in Diversity: A Closer Look at Diverse and Minority Clubs

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign prides itself in diversity and the variety of students that attend the school. From what I have concluded, the college definition of diversity is [the](#) uniting [of](#) students from different cultural backgrounds. [At](#) the beginning of the year, Welcome Week brings all university students together for various events and one in particular is “Quad Day.” The majority of the registered student organizations (RSO’s) set up booths on the main quadrangle, which becomes [flooded with](#) students. This is [an opportunity](#) for students to sign up for [just about](#) any activity they can [possibly](#) imagine – Underwater Hockey, Ultimate Frisbee, and so much more. An observation on Quad Day is [the diversity of many organizations](#) that are [represented](#). Some of these include the Asian American Association, East Asian Calligraphy Club, Women of Color, and more. These minority-based clubs are abundant on campus. There are also RSO’s that try to promote diversity at UIUC, even if they are not centered on a certain culture. More specifically, different dance groups, like Dance2XS, pride themselves in their diversity. This leads me to wonder when these groups came into existence, the [origin and purpose](#) of these groups, and what these groups try to achieve.

The University of Illinois is home to many different students from various cultural backgrounds – African American, Asian American, Native American, and so on. In relation to the total student population, the overall minority enrollment is around thirty percent (Princeton Review). Within that, Asian Americans consist of the largest minority group at the university with African Americans and Latinos following, each making up six percent of the university’s

population. Finally, there are Middle Eastern students at five percent and Native Americans at half a percent of the university's undergraduates (Waller). These numbers continue to increase slowly. Out of about 30,000 students, thirty percent of that seems very little. This leads to my questions regarding the formation of these minority clubs – were they created to [help](#) minorities [feel more connected to one another?](#) What is the purpose of these groups? Why do some student organizations try to promote diversity?

These questions [and many more](#) have been asked throughout the years. [Minority and clubs promoting diversity](#) on campus are multi-faceted. An article published in the Daily Illini in 2005 by Teresa Sewell discusses this topic and what students think about the minority clubs on campus. Some students believe that labeling an organization “black,” or any other minority label, creates reverse segregation, which means the exclusion of whites. These students think these groups are causing a new form of racism. But, officials counterpoint these ideas. A counselor from the Office of Minority Student Affairs ([OMSA](#)), Roy Saldana, says that minorities need programs such as OMSA because they are “academically behind as a result of ripple effects coming from historical oppression and under-funded high schools that have not properly prepared them for college” (Sewell). [What](#) this counselor is saying is that minorities need these “boosts” and organizations because of factors they cannot control, like high school education or socioeconomic status. These established groups are not meant to segregate, but rather meant to aid those [who](#) need it. Some white students also feel that if “black” or another minority is mentioned in the title of a club or event, then they are not welcome. [White](#) students feel that if a minority group is associated with an event, then they will feel uncomfortable because that cultural group does not want them there. Jerald Gary, a student that attended the University of Illinois, said a lot of students think, “Well, that’s a black event and only black people can come” (Sewell). But, this is a

misconception because all are usually welcome to different events like the “African-American Homecoming.” Sundiata Cha-Jua, director of the Afro-American Studies Research Program says they “name things simply as a matter of reflecting cultural source” (Sewell). He thinks that people are misinformed, stereotyping, and assuming they are not welcome when the purpose of including the minority in the name is just to advocate their culture. These organizations can be a forum for minorities to relate to one another as they try to gain equality in a predominantly white university and country. More often than not, clubs and events that are associated with a particular minority are open for anyone to participate. These clubs can also provide a way for minorities to be more acknowledged. In an electronic newsletter by the Office of Minority Student Affairs says that the cultural houses, committees, and events created on campus have allowed the small percentage of minorities to be noticed. For example, the La Casa Cultural Latina “provides a welcoming environment for all who are interested in learning about issues relevant to the Latina/o community” (Waller). The dedication of the group towards providing more knowledge about the Latino/a population has allowed more recognition for this minority group. A business student said that because of these groups, it also educates others about the different minorities on campus (Waller). These organizations allow others to learn more about people different than themselves. This is one goal of the dance group, Dance2XS. They try to promote diversity through dance, as it says on their website (<http://dance2xs.illinexus.org/index.html>). As for myself, I have also tended to think that if an event mentions a minority group within the title, then it is strictly for that minority group. I wanted to disprove this theory by attending a minority-labeled event myself.

To find a “minority” event to attend, I searched the University of Illinois’s website, and under the “Cultural and International” campus calendar, I found an African dance workshop. This workshop would be a place to observe those that instruct and participate. Called the “Djibril

Camara and the Mara Giri Ensemble,” this dance workshop is described as “high-energy workout with live West African drumming and song” on the website (“Dance Workshop”). Anyone is welcome and no experience is necessary. I decided I would step out of my comfort zone and observe while I attended the class.

Since the event was “cultural” on the website, I wondered what types of people it would draw. Would there be other people of African descent? How many people would attend? What would the instructor be like? For these reasons, I felt nervous since I did not know what to expect. I arrived ten minutes before the class started at the university YMCA. Eventually two white women came and started to move the tables in the hall where the workshop would take place. Soon the drummers started to roll in with their African drums and a few more people showed up. In total, there were seven other people, the instructor, and me. The instructor was black and also spoke French. English seemed to be his second language. All the other participants were white. I signed up, paid my ten-dollar fee, and jumped in the circle where the others were warming up. The drum ensemble began and all of us ran in a circle doing various arm movements. When that was finished, we all formed lines and observed the instructor when he taught us about ten different combinations. After we had learned them, we formed three lines and danced across the floor, each time doing one of the combos he taught us. It was definitely high energy and a vigorous cardio workout. For the final portion of the class, we formed a circle and the instructor gave one of the dancers a black rope. He went into the center and danced some of the moves we had learned that night. He then passed the rope to the next person, who also performed the different dances we had learned in the center. Then it was my turn – I was anxious to go! After I danced, I passed the rope to the next dancer. The workshop was quite an experience and one I had not expected.

Before going to the class, I thought there would be more diverse participants – my

definition of diversity for this purpose is people that are another race besides white. Since I found the activity in the cultural calendar, it was easy to assume people different from myself (as in cultural background) would be attending. There were a few, [such as](#) the instructor and one of the drummers, who I concluded in the most impartial way to be Indian. This points out the way I assumed people of different cultural backgrounds would attend simply because of the cultural label. The drumbeats and instruction was authentically West African and I really enjoyed myself. The experience I had with [this group](#) is also similar to other [cultural](#) events held on campus.

Many on-campus events provide ways to promote a minority's culture and bring different types of people together. As described in another article in the Daily Illini by Arvind Badrinarayanan, the Indian Dance Club holds a bi-annual event at the Illini Union that involves Indian Garbha dance. The night focuses on three traditional Indian dances and anyone is welcome. Not only does this give the Indian culture recognition, one of the goals of the night is to bring people together through the Indian culture. At this particular Garbha night, a student that attended described [the event as follows](#), "The diversity there was amazing...we've had more non-Indians than ever before..." (Badrinarayanan). This night was clearly a success in bringing together people of many different cultures, which seems to be the objective of this event as well as many other minority-based events. This also seems to be an exception to the theory that students generalize minority-based events as strictly for the minorities. These clubs can also utilize their performances to send messages to the student body. An article in the Daily Illini by Maria Zamudio describes an event held by a Native American organization, The Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan. This particular minority club attempts to send political messages through their performances. They hosted a two-hour event in 2005 that included various performances like dancing and poetry readings not meant for entertainment, but to honor their culture. This minority-

based group is also a political group and addresses issues related to campus, such as Chief Illiniwek, low minority enrollment, and how they relate to the university community. They made it clear that the purpose of the ceremony was to honor their ancestors. A graduate student that attended the ceremony said that it is very important to have a place like this to “express politicized form of expression against the mainstream ideas” (Zamudio). The ceremony allows for these minorities to express what they truly think, even if it is not what the majority of the students at the University of Illinois believe, like the issues stated above. Since performance is an important factor to some of these diverse groups, I decided to research more about the university’s dance group, Dance2XS, a group that prides themselves in their diversity.

I was able to meet with the president of Dance2XS, Rebecca Rosenberg, for an interview to discuss more about their diversity and involvement on campus. By discussing diversity with her, this would help shape my field site more by receiving her input. She has been involved with the program since her second semester of freshman year and is currently a senior. For the history of Dance2XS, she said three students started the group in 1998 and one of them, Patrick Chen, is still the main director of all Dance2XS groups. It has grown into an international group with branches in Italy, Portugal, Norway, and [many other locations](#), so it is very commendable that it started here. The UIUC group consists of about thirty members of different races and perform^s primarily hip-hop dance. On their website, it says their goal is to be a “committed performance-based dance group showcasing mixtures of dance and culture.” It also says their purpose is to “promote unity and diversity through various styles of dance.” Their biannual performance, called Urbanite, was only one week away. This performance is especially important, because it brings together many of the international Dance2XS groups. To advertise, Dance2XS sent out flyers through email and posted them around campus.

The Urbanite flyer is an artifact that is another contributor to my field site. The blue and gold color scheme has modern fonts for the text and says “Urbanite ’08” in large letters. The flyer has “10 Years of Dance – Music – Culture” typed on it and has portions of different flags from around the world. There is a list of all the Dance2XS groups that will be performing: Dance2XS UIUC, Caliente, Chicago, Michigan, Element, Purdue, Mexico, and others. The show is at the Canopy Club in Urbana, Illinois and there is contact information as well. By looking at this flyer, it is certain they are trying to promote their diversity and unity of different people, as seen by the pictures of dancers and portions of flags from different countries. I attended the event and observed the performers as well as who was attending.

My friends and I arrived at the Urbana Canopy Club around ten o’clock, which was when the show was supposed to start. As I was waiting in line, I noticed a few people in front of me talking in a different language, which already signaled to me the diversity of the crowd. After we showed our picture identification and gave our tickets, we entered the club. There were many people already there, [representing many](#) different races: African American, Mexican, Asian, white, and more. There was a stage and two screens projecting previous Dance2XS performances. Music was playing, mainly hip-hop and popular songs. We chose to sit in the balcony where there were seats rather than standing near the stage. I also obtained a program, which is another artifact that gave me more information about Dance2XS. Within the program, there was a mission statement, a history of Dance2XS, and a list of all the groups performing. This program is very similar to the flyer I received, that is, it had the same front and had pictures of the diverse Dance2XS groups. It also had Dance2XS’s mission statement, which says, “Our mission as an international entertainment company is to redefine our industry by showcasing and sharing diverse mixtures of dance, music, and culture.” This reiterates what the Dance2XS UIUC group says on their website

and what Rosenberg described during [our](#) interview. The program also explains how the 2XS groups participate in workshops, which allows the dancers from around the world to “share, experience, and learn from each other.” This describes again how all of the 2XS groups are united through dance.

Finally the show was about to begin. Around 10:45 PM, the MC introduced himself and Patrick Chen, the founder of Dance2XS at UIUC as described earlier, spoke. Then a short video was shown of all of the groups that were present that night. The first performance began with Element, a dance troupe from LA. The groups that followed were 2XS Chicago, 2XS Purdue, Attention (Taiwan), 2XS Caliente, 312, Nonstop, 2XS UMich, 2XS Mexico, Redefinition, Funksters, and finally 2XS UIUC. All had different themes, [such as](#) the mall, the airport, Wonderland, and a house party. One aspect that I observed and thought was the most notable was that all groups had races besides white.

Overall, it was a very high-energy show. Even when there were technical difficulties with the music, the crowd was very supportive. I also thought it was very commendable that all of the Dance2XS groups were very diverse – that is, having various races besides white within their group. Rosenberg’s definition of diversity is “all kinds of people coming together,” which the show definitely succeeded in doing. The show was even more diverse due to the fact that it brought together many of the international performers. Rosenberg also described the international diversity on the UIUC Dance2XS. She said their group definitely has a variety of races and they certainly do not discriminate based on race. A student originally from Taiwan in the UIUC 2XS group had trouble communicating through English, but he is a very strong choreographer and everyone can understand him in that sense. The members at UIUC are connected through dance as well as all of the international 2XS groups. Rosenberg said, “It does not matter if you do not speak

the same language, because everyone has dance in common and can come together and learn the same routine.” The group at the University of Illinois is able to see what styles of dance the international groups perform and transfer their ideas into their own routines. Also, different types of dance pull from different types of cultures, so this is another way that Dance2XS is diverse. Dance2XS is able to promote diversity through the different styles of dance as well as the variety of people that are performing the routines.

After completing an interview regarding diversity within a UIUC club as well as attending various events, it made me realize that a club on campus does not need to have a minority group within the title of the club in order for it to be considered a “diverse” organization. For the particular club I chose, diversity (keeping with the same definition of bringing different people from different cultures together) seems to occur without purposely trying to unite different people. They are successful with connecting people of various races through a commonality, which in this case is dance. Compared to my dance workshop observational field study, an event based on a particular culture was not necessarily diverse, whereas a club that does not revolve around a minority group can be very diverse. These two groups, Dance2XS and the Djibril Camara workshop, are similar in the promotion of a different type of cultural dance not found in America. This is enriching for the participants and for the University as a whole. This is because minority clubs and diverse groups on campus unite their own members as well as encourage others to integrate with people from different cultures beside themselves.

After reviewing all the information I researched and observed first hand, it leads me to believe that diversity within a college campus relies on the individual student. When designated minority events are held, it is ultimately up to the single student to decide if they want to attend and meet people different from themselves. Like the dance class I went to, it was deemed

“cultural,” yet anyone was welcome to attend. It was my choice to go and experience something that I was not familiar with. Perhaps the reason more people did not attend was because of the lack of advertising that this is a group open to anyone. Students might not have the courage to attend an event that is based on a culture different from theirs. Similarly, with Dance2XS, anyone can go to their show Urbanite, which attracts a very diverse crowd. This may attract more people because it is not revolved around a specific culture, as compared to the dance workshop. It is a student’s decision if they want to attend these events, and by the college definition, create a more diverse campus, an element that the University of Illinois strives to achieve.